

METHOD AND SYSTEM FOR  
SCHEDULING INBOUND INQUIRIES

TECHNICAL FIELD

This invention relates in general to the fields of telephony and computer networks, and more particularly to a method and system for scheduling inbound inquiries made  
5 by telephone or by other electronic messages.

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BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

Telephone calling centers represent the front line for customer service and marketing operations of many businesses. Typical calling centers receive or make  
5 hundreds of telephone calls per day with the aid of automated telephony equipment. With the Internet growing in importance as a way of communicating with customers, calling centers have also evolved to send and respond to electronic messages, such as e-mail or instant messages.

10 Calling centers often play a dual role of both sending outbound inquiries and answering inbound inquiries. For instance, calling centers use predictive dialers that automatically dial outbound telephone calls to contact individuals and then transfer the contacted  
15 individuals to agents when the individual answers the phone. Inbound telephone calls by individuals to the calling center are received by telephony equipment in the calling center and distributed to agents as the agents become available. Calling centers often combine outbound  
20 and inbound functions as a way to improve the talk time efficiency of calling center agents. Thus, for instance, when inbound calls have expected hold times that are acceptable, agents may be reassigned to place outbound telephone calls to help ensure that the agents are fully  
25 occupied.

One important goal for calling centers that receive inbound inquiries, such as telephone calls or electronic message inquiries, is to transfer the inbound inquiries  
to appropriate agents as quickly and efficiently as  
30 possible. A variety of telephone call receiving devices

are commercially available to help meet this goal. One such receiving device is an automatic call distribution system ("ACD") that receives plural inbound telephone calls and then distributes the received inbound calls to agents based on agent skill set, information available about the caller, and rules that match inbound callers to desired queues. Inbound calls may be routed to different queues based on rules and data, allowing a basic prioritization of inbound calls. For example, inbound callers seeking information about a new credit card account might be assigned to a different queue than inbound callers having questions about their account balances. Once assigned to a queue, calls in that queue are generally handled in a first-in-first-out basis. Thus, a caller's hold time generally depends upon the caller's depth in the queue.

Another type of call receiving device is a voice response unit ("VRU"), also known as an interactive voice response system. When an inbound call is received by a VRU, the caller is generally greeted with an automated voice that queries for information such as the caller's account number. Information provided by the caller is typically used to route the call to an appropriate queue. VRUs are used in conjunction with ACDs, but also improve performance of less complex receiving devices such as PBX systems.

As telephony migrates from conventional telephone signals to the use of Internet-based computer networks, voice over internet protocol ("VOIP") will become an increasingly common platform for handling inbound

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telephone calls. One advantage of VOIP is enhanced access to account information for inbound calls with improved speed and accuracy. For example, conventional ACD and VRU systems collect caller information when

5 inbound calls are received. One example of such caller information is automated number identification ("ANI") information provided by telephone networks that identify the telephone number of the inbound call. Another example is destination number identification system

10 information ("DNIS") which allows the purpose of the inbound call to be determined from the telephone number dialed by the inbound caller. Using this caller information and account information gathered by a VRU or ACD, conventional calling centers are able to gather

15 information on the caller and provide that information to the agent. The use of VOIP improves the integration of data and telephony by passing both data and telephony through a network with internet protocol and by combining voice inquiries with electronic message inquiries, such

20 as e-mail. One example of such integration is the Intelligent Contact Management ("ICM") solution sold by CISCO Systems, Inc. Another example is the integrated response systems available from eShare Technologies, described in greater detail at [www.eShare.com](http://www.eShare.com).

25 Although telephone receiving devices provide improved distribution of inbound telephone calls to agents, the receiving devices are generally not helpful in managing hold times when the number of inbound calls exceeds the agent answering capacity. For instance,

30 customers tend to make inbound calls for service at

similar times. A large volume of inbound calls tends to lead to longer wait times during popular calling periods resulting in customer dissatisfaction. As a consequence, during periods of heavy volumes and long hold times, a  
5 greater number of inbound callers hang up or "silently" close their accounts by seeking other service providers with better service. Another example of excessive hold times affecting the behavior of inbound callers occurs with telemarketing. The volume of inbound calls in a  
10 marketing operation tends to increase dramatically shortly after a television advertisement is aired. Extended hold times result in a greater number of customer hang-ups and lost sales.

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SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

Therefore a need has arisen for a method and system which orders inbound inquiries, such as telephone calls, to improve the efficiency of responding to the inbound inquiries.

A further need exists for a method and system that forecasts the behavior of those making inbound inquiries, such as inbound telephone callers, to predict the outcome of an inbound inquiry.

A further need exists for a method and system that applies the forecasted behavior of those making inbound inquiries, such as inbound telephone callers, to order the inbound inquiries for response by agents.

A further need exists for a method and system that solves for an optimum ordering sequence for responding to inbound inquiries.

In accordance with the present invention, a method and system for ordering inbound inquiries is provided that substantially eliminates or reduces disadvantages and problems associated with previously developed methods and systems for responding to inbound inquiries. Inbound inquiry information associated with each inbound inquiry is applied to a model to determine a priority value for ordering the inbound inquiry for response relative to other inbound inquiries.

More specifically, inbound inquiries may include inbound telephone calls, e-mails, instant messages, or other electronic messages formats, such as those available through the internet. In an embodiment for scheduling inbound telephone calls, a telephone call

receiving device receives plural inbound telephone calls for distribution to one or more agents. The telephone call receiving device may include an ACD, a VRU, a PBX, a VOIP server or any combination of such devices that are operable to receive plural inbound telephone calls and redirect the inbound telephone calls to one or more agents. The inbound telephone calls have associated caller information, such as ANI or DNIS information, which the receiving device interprets. ANI information identifies the telephone number from which the inbound call originates, and DNIS information identifies the telephone number to which the inbound call was directed.

A scheduling module interfaced with or integrated within the receiving device determines an order for the handling of inbound telephone calls based in part on the predicted outcome of the inbound telephone calls. In one embodiment, the scheduling module places the inbound calls in a queue, the queue acting as a virtual hold, and applies a caller model to the caller information associated with the inbound calls in order to forecast the predicted outcome of the inbound calls. The order for handling the inbound calls is based on a priority value calculated from the application of a caller model to the caller information by a call evaluation sub-module and based on the capacity of the receiving device. As calls are scheduled by the scheduling module for handling by the receiving device, the scheduling module releases the inbound calls from the virtual hold queue and places the inbound calls in the queue of the receiving device. In an alternative embodiment, the scheduling module or

the receiving device may perform real-time scheduling of inbound call inventory by re-ordering queues of the receiving device based on the priority value.

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The call evaluation sub-module uses algorithms and  
5 models provided by a modeling module that analyzes  
inbound call histories to forecast outcomes of pending  
inbound calls. It utilizes the forecasts to compute  
priority values. For example, in the modeling module,  
performing logistic regression on prior inbound calls  
10 using caller and/or call information and prior call  
history as independent (or predictive) variables and a  
dependent variable of caller attrition, provides a model  
that forecasts pending inbound caller attrition based on  
the caller and/or call information. Alternatively,  
15 performing linear regression modeling on prior inbound  
calls, using caller and/or call information as  
independent (or predictive) variables and a dependent  
variable of connect time, provides a model that forecasts  
the expected agent talk time for each incoming call.

20 Predictive variables for the logistic and linear  
regression equations may include call information such as  
the originating number or exchange, the originating  
location, the dialed number, the time of day and the  
likely purpose of the call. In addition, they may  
25 include caller information such as account information  
derived from association of the originating number and an  
account data base, or derived from data input by the  
inbound caller by a VRU. From caller information and/or  
call information, additional predictive variables are  
30 available for forecasting the outcome of the inbound

call, including demographic information that may be associated with the call and/or caller.

In one embodiment, the call evaluation sub-module estimates one or more quantities of interest with one or more models provided by the modeling module, and computes the call's priority value based on the quantities of interest. For example, the call value of "the probability of a sale per minute of expected talk time" may be estimated by dividing the estimated probability of a sale by the estimated talk time.

In another embodiment, the call evaluation sub-module uses the estimated quantities of interest to formulate and solve a constrained optimization problem based on conventional mathematical techniques, such as the simplex method for linear problems or the Conjugate gradient and Projected Lagrangian techniques for Non-linear problems. For example, call evaluation sub-module may present a value that represents the solution to maximizing objectives such as agent productivity to either minimize attrition or to produce product sales.

The present invention provides a number of important technical advantages. One important technical advantage is that inbound inquiries, such as inbound telephone calls, are ordered for response based at least in part on the predicted outcome of the inbound inquiries. This allows, for instance, agents to respond to customers that are more sensitive to holding time before responding to customers who are less sensitive to holding time. This also allows, as another example, enhanced efficiency of handling of inbound telephone calls by seeking to improve

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the overall outcomes of the inbound calls based on the  
forecasted outcomes. For instance, in a telemarketing  
environment, inbound callers with a higher likelihood of  
purchasing an item or service may be responded to before  
5 customers with a lower probability of a purchase outcome.  
In fact, computing estimated outcomes and then  
formulating and solving the appropriate constrained  
optimization problem provides an ordering sequence that  
maximizes purchases made by inbound callers responding to  
10 a television advertisement.

Another important technical advantage of the present  
invention is that forecasted outcomes are available with  
minimal caller information. Generally the identity and  
purpose of inbound calls are difficult to discern because  
15 little information is available regarding the inbound  
caller. The use of statistical analysis of historical  
inbound calling data allows accurate modeling of outcomes  
with minimal knowledge of the identity and purpose of the  
inbound caller.

20 Another important technical advantage of the present  
invention is that inbound calls are prioritized based on  
caller and call information. The present invention  
allows flexible use in a number of inbound inquiry  
environments such as telemarketing and customer service  
25 environments. Caller models may have different  
predictive variables depending upon the modeled outcome  
and the caller information obtained with the inbound  
inquiry. For instance, telemarketing applications using  
models that forecast probability of a purchase may focus  
30 on predictive variables derived from demographic

information based on the origination of the inbound call.  
In contrast, customer service applications using models  
that forecast caller attrition may have more detailed  
predictive variables derived from customer account  
5 information. Thus, inbound calling models and objectives  
may be closely tailored to a user's particular  
application. Also, estimates of the inbound call talk  
time may lead to constrained optimization solutions  
designed to maximize the use of the available agent talk  
10 time. Further, an overall response strategy that  
accounts for electronic message inquiries as well as  
telephone inquiries is more easily adopted.

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BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

A more complete understanding of the present invention and advantages thereof may be acquired by referring to the following description taken in  
5 conjunction with the accompanying drawings, in which like reference numbers indicate like features, and wherein:

FIGURE 1 depicts a block diagram of an inbound telephone call receiving device interfaced with an inbound scheduling system; and

10 FIGURE 2 depicts a flow diagram of a method for ordering inbound callers for response by agents.

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DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE INVENTION

Preferred embodiments of the present invention are illustrated in the FIGURES, like numeral being used to refer to like and corresponding parts of the various  
5 drawings.

Under normal circumstances, inbound telephone calling centers maintain holding times for inbound callers within desired constraints by adjusting the response capacity of the calling center. For instance,  
10 during projected or actual periods of heavy inbound calling volume, additional agents may be assigned to respond to inbound calls by adding agents to the calling center or by reducing the number of outbound calls. However, once the overall capacity of a calling center is  
15 reached, inbound calls in excess of calling center capacity will generally result in increased holding times for the inbound callers.

Inadequate capacity to handle inbound calls may result from periodic increases in the number of inbound  
20 calls during popular calling times, or may result from one time surges due to factors such as system-wide customer service glitches or the effects of advertising. Generally, the excess inbound calls are assigned to hold for an available agent in queues of an inbound telephone  
25 call receiving device and are handled on a first-in first-out basis for each holding queue. Often, the result of excessive hold times is that customers having a greater sensitivity to long hold times will hang-up in frustration.

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Responding to holding inbound callers on a first-in-first-out basis does not necessarily provide the most efficient results for a calling center. Agent time is used most efficiently when an agent is responding to inbound callers most likely to achieve a desired outcome. For instance, in a telemarketing role an agent is most productive when speaking with inbound callers likely to purchase the marketed service or product. Similarly, in a customer service role, an agent is most productive when speaking with inbound callers who provide a greater rate of profitability to the calling center. Thus, routing calls to agents on a first-in-first-out basis does not provide the most efficient use of agent time when inbound callers having a higher probability of a desired outcome are treated in the same manner as inbound callers having a lower probability of a desired outcome. The same principle applies when inbound inquiries are received in alternative formats, such as e-mail or instant messages.

Referring now to FIGURE 1, a block diagram depicts an inbound scheduling system 10 that schedules inbound telephone calls for response by agents in an order based in part on the predicted outcome of the inbound telephone calls. Inbound scheduling system 10 includes a scheduling module 12, a call evaluation sub-module 13, and a modeling module 14, and is interfaced with an inbound call history data base 16 and account information data base 18. Modeling module 14 builds one or more models that forecast the outcomes of inbound calls using inbound call history from data base 16 and/or from account information of data base 18. Scheduling module

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12 applies the models to forecast outcomes of pending inbound calls and schedules an order for agents to respond to the pending inbound calls based on the call evaluation sub-module 13. Modeling module 14 builds  
5 statistical models and call evaluation sub-module 13 computes the priority value which is used by scheduling module 12. The priority value is the result of computations based on the models, but also of solutions to optimization problems that may be defined on  
10 computations based on the models.

Inbound scheduling system 10 interfaces with an inbound telephone call receiving device 20. Scheduling system 10 and receiving device 20 may be integrated in a single computing platform, or may be based on separate  
15 computing platforms interfaced with proprietary application programming interfaces of the receiving device 20 or interfaced with commercially available application middle ware such as Dialogic's CT Connect or Microsoft's TAPI. Inbound telephone call receiving  
20 device 20 is a conventional telephony device that accepts inbound telephone calls through a telephony interface 22, such as conventional T1 or fiber interfaces. Inbound telephone call receiving device 20 may include an ACD, a VRU, a PBX, a VOIP server or any combination of such  
25 conventional devices. Inbound telephone calls received through interface 22 are distributed to one or more answering queues 24 for response by agents operating telephony devices 26. Although FIGURE 1 depicts an embodiment of the present invention that orders inbound  
30 telephone calls, alternative embodiments apply scheduling

module 12 and modeling module 14 to schedule other types  
of inbound inquiries, such as e-mail or instant message  
inquiries, by interfacing inbound scheduling system 10  
with an appropriate inbound receiving device, such as an  
5 internet server.

Inbound telephone call receiving device 20 accepts  
inbound telephone calls through interface 22 and obtains  
caller information associated with the inbound calls such  
as ANI and DNIS information. When receiving device 20  
10 includes a VRU, additional caller information, such as  
account information, is obtained through automated  
interaction with the inbound callers. For instance, a  
VRU may query an inbound caller to provide an account  
number or a reason for the call, such as to open a new  
15 account, to change account information, to check account  
information, to purchase a particular service or item, or  
to collect inbound caller information when ANI is not  
operative, such as when caller-ID is blocked. In an  
alternative embodiment, inbound inquiries may include e-  
20 mail or instant messages that provide inquiry information  
based on login ID, e-mail address, IP or instant message  
address. In such an embodiment, additional information  
can be gathered by an automated e-mail or instant message  
survey response that requests a phone number, purchase  
25 interest, account number or other relevant information.

Receiving device 20 passes the caller information to  
scheduling system 10, such as through a data query, and  
awaits a response from scheduling system 10 before  
allocating the inbound call to an answering queue. In  
30 addition, receiving device 20 provides scheduling system

10 with agent activity and capacity. For instance, a receiving device 20 may include both a VRU and an ACD with the ACD providing agent activity information. When receiving device 20 includes a VRU, an "out of order" response may be provided by scheduling system 10 when operator capacity is unavailable or in high use, meaning that the first call in is not necessarily the first call out.

Scheduling module 12 keeps inbound calls in a queue that acts as a virtual hold until a response is desired and then releases the inbound call for placement in an answering queue 24. Thus, scheduling system 10 responds to queries from receiving device 20 based on the priority of the inbound call, essentially creating an ordered queue on receiving device 20 by delaying the response to inbound calls having lower priorities. In one alternative embodiment, scheduling module 12 may re-order queues directly within receiving device 20 to allow real-time ordering of inbound telephone call queues.

Scheduling module 12 obtains data to apply to a caller model by performing a look-up based on the caller information received from receiving device 20. Caller information may include account number, zip code, area code, telephone exchange, reservation number or other pertinent information obtained from the inbound caller, such as with a VRU, or derived from information obtained by the receiving device 20 with the inbound call, such as ANI or DNIS information. The nature of caller information depends upon the implementation of scheduling system 10 and is generally configurable through a

graphical user interface provided with conventional receiving devices. In addition to the caller information, scheduling module 12 may query and join data from other sources such as zip+4 and credit bureau sources and demographic information otherwise derivable from the caller information.

When sufficient capacity exists for response by receiving device 20, scheduling system 10 releases calls immediately back to receiving device 20. In other words inbound calls are not delayed if sufficient capacity exists to handle the inbound calls, but are routed for immediate answering. When capacity is tight on receiving device 20, calls are delayed on a virtual hold by scheduling system 10 until an appropriate time based on the priority value computed by the call evaluation sub-module 13. Whether or not inbound calls are delayed, scheduling system 10 gathers and stores data for the inbound calls in the inbound call history data base 16. The outcome of inbound calls is also gathered and stored along with forecasted outcomes to provide a detailed call-by-call history for use in future modeling and for verification of forecasted outcome versus actual outcome. For instance, once an inbound call is completed, results such as a successful connect with an agent, an abandoned call, a purchase, or customer attrition from billing records are associated with inbound calls.

Modeling module 14 creates caller models by performing statistical analysis on appropriate data taken from inbound call history data base 16 and account information data base 18. The statistical analysis

performed by modeling module 14 builds models by associating the outcome of a call (i.e., the dependent variable) to the information available when the call is received (i.e., the independent variables) The end result  
5 of each model is equations that when computed provide a forecast for the outcome of interest (e.g., agent talk time, sale: yes/no, account cancelled within x days: yes/no). The application of caller models to caller and/or call information may be performed as calls arrive,  
10 or may be performed preemptively to calculate potential scores in the beginning of a time period to provide more rapid response when circumstances warrant.

One type of statistical analysis appropriate for modeling discrete outcomes (e.g., sale: yes/no, account  
15 cancelled within x days: yes/no) is logistic regression. Some examples of forecasted outcomes include estimating probability an inbound caller will hang up in a predetermined hold time, the probability a customer will cancel an account, or the probability the customer will  
20 make a purchase. As an example, the following logistic regression equation forecasts the probability of purchase based on the independent variables income and age:

$$\exp(a_0 + a_1 * \text{age} + a_2 * \text{income}) / [1 + \exp(a_0 + a_1 * \text{age} + a_2 * \text{income})]$$

where:

- 25  $a_0$  = a constant representing the model's intercept  
 $a_1$  = the parameter for the predictive variable age  
 $a_2$  = the parameter for the predictive variable income

Another type of statistical analysis appropriate for  
modeling continuous outcomes, such as talk time or sale  
30 amount, is linear regression. For example, the following

linear regression equation forecasts agent talk time ("TT") based on independent variables time-on-books ("TOB"), time-of-day between 8-9 am ("TOD"), balance ("BAL") and delinquency level ("DL"):

5 
$$TT = b_0 + b_1 TOB + b_2 TODflag + b_3 BAL + b_4 DL$$

$b_0$  = a constant representing the model's intercept

$b_1$  = the parameter for the predictive variable TOB

$b_2$  = the parameter for the predictive variable TOD

(i.e., Was the call between 8-9 (1=yes, 2=no))

10  $b_3$  = the parameter for the predictive variable BAL

$b_4$  = the parameter for the predictive variable DL

In alternative embodiments, statistical models that forecast outcomes may be developed by a number of alternative techniques. For instance, neural networks, classification and regression trees (CART), and Chi squared automatic detection (CHAID) are statistical techniques for modeling both discrete and continuous dependent variables. Another example is cluster analysis, which, with an association of the resulting cluster assignment equations to the dependent variables allows for simplified models or may be used to improve the effectiveness of other techniques. Each alternative statistical technique will result in different forecasting equations which may have advantages for different types of forecasting circumstances.

Essentially, however, each type of equation will associate an outcome as a dependent variable with the call and caller information available while the call is processed as independent variables. In general mathematical terms, for each possible discrete outcome,

such as sale: yes/no, account cancelled within x days:  
yes/no, where  $i=1, \dots, M$ :

$$\text{Prob}(\text{outcome}=i) = f_i(x(1), x(2), \dots, x(N))$$

where:

5         $x(i)$  stands for the  $i$ th independent variable, and  
          $f_i(x(1), x(2), \dots, x(N))$  stands for the modeling equation  
for outcome  $i$  and can take different forms depending upon  
the statistical technique chosen

For each continuous outcome, such as talk-time or  
10    amount of sale:

$$\text{Estimate of dependent variable} = g(x(1), x(2), \dots, x(N))$$

where:

$x(i)$  stands for the  $i$ th independent variable, and  
 $g(x(1), x(2), \dots, x(N))$  stands for the modeling  
15    equation, and can take different forms depending upon the  
statistical technique chosen.

Forecasted outcomes and predictive variables are  
user defined, and depend on the inbound inquiries being  
scheduled. As an example, for inbound inquiries related  
20    to a solicitation effort, such as telephone calls  
following a TV advertisement, the outcome may be:  
yes/no/hang-up; amount of purchase (continuous); amount  
by type of product (continuous) split by product type;  
approval of a credit application yes/no. As another  
25    example, for customer service inquiries, exemplary  
outcomes may be: customer satisfaction yes/no; closure of  
account within x days yes/no; change in loan balance  
within x days (continuous); or dispute with a positive  
resolution/ dispute with a negative resolution/ no  
30    dispute. Other types of outcomes that may be of interest

to both post-solicitation and customer service inquiries include: agent talk-time (continuous); agent talk time by type of agent (continuous split by agent type, such as general/supervisor/specialist).

5       The selection of predictive variables depends upon the type of data available and the circumstances of the outcome which is being forecasted. For example, in a situation in which the inquiries come from individuals known to the calling center, data available for  
10 predicting outcomes may include: account information; application information, such as employment, age, income, bank account information; relationship data such as other account information; results of other modeling efforts, such as behavior and response scores; credit bureau data;  
15 check clearing data; e-mail domain information; and trigger events, such as solicitations, TV advertisements, and account statements. When geographic location of the call or caller can be established, this may yield additional predictive data, such as zip+4 credit bureau  
20 information, census demographics, and third party models, such as credit bureau clusters. Data available from a call itself may include information input through a VRU, including branch sequence and initial number called, and the time at the place of the origination of the inbound  
25 inquiry. In addition, the call environment itself may provide data based on the types and number of calls received in a recent period of time, the type and number within a period of time, such as a particular hour or day, and the results provided by the calls.

In another embodiment of the invention, scheduling module 12 orders inbound inquiries to explicitly optimize a desired outcome, such as a maximum number of purchases or a minimum number of losses due to attrition, taking into account the limitations of the environment operating at the time. Quantities of interest, such as probability of a sale, probability of attrition, or expected talk time, are estimated with models generated by modeling module 14. The estimated quantities of interest are used to solve a constrained optimization problem with conventional mathematical techniques, such as the simplex method for linear problems or the Conjugate gradient and Projected Lagrangian techniques for Non-linear problems.

One example of optimization applied to inbound telephone calls is the maximization of agent productivity to minimize attrition of inbound callers, as illustrated by the following equation:

5                   Max     $\sum_{i=1, \dots, N} x(i) * (p_2(i) - p_1(i))$

                  Subject to:

$\sum x(i) * t(i) \leq T$

$i=1, \dots, N$

10                    $x(i) \text{ in } (0, 1)$

                  where:

$x(i)$  (the decision variable) denotes whether call  $i$  should be kept or dropped

$p_1(i)$  is the estimate for the probability of  
15 attrition for the caller's account if the call is not answered

$p_2(i)$  is the estimate for the probability of  
attrition for the caller's account if the call is answered

20                    $t(i)$  is the estimate of the expected talk-time for call  $i$

$T$  is the total available Agent time for a user-defined time interval

$N$  is the number of calls in queue

25                   Once the constrained optimization problem is solved, letting  $Q$  be the optimal dual variable for the talk-time constraint, the call priority value may be given by the reduced objective value:  $p_2(i) - p_1(i) - Q * t(i)$ .

30                   Another example of optimization applied to inbound telephone calls is the maximization of agent productivity

to produce sales to inbound callers, as illustrated by the following equation:

$$\begin{aligned} \text{Max} \quad & \sum x(i) * q(i) \\ & i=1, \dots, N \end{aligned}$$

5            Subject to:

$$\begin{aligned} \sum x(i) * t(i) & \leq T \\ i & = 1, \dots, N \\ x(i) & \text{ in } (0, 1) \end{aligned}$$

where:

10             $x(i)$  (the decision variable) denotes whether call  $i$  should be kept or dropped

$q(i)$  is the estimate for the probability that the call will result in a sale

15             $t(i)$  is the estimate of the expected talk-time for call  $i$

$T$  is the total available Agent time for a user-defined time interval

$N$  is the number of calls in queue.

Once the constrained optimization problem is solved, letting  $R$  be the optimal dual variable for the talk time constraint, the call priority value may be given by the reduced objective value:  $q(i) - R * t(i)$ .

Although FIGURE 1 depicts an embodiment of the present invention that orders inbound telephone calls, alternative embodiments apply scheduling module 12 and modeling module 14 to schedule other types of inbound inquiries, such as e-mail or instant message inquiries, by interfacing inbound scheduling system 10 with an appropriate inbound receiving device, such as an internet server. The scheduling module may be receiving inbound

inquiries from a plurality of sources (e.g. ACD, VRU, internet server) and returning priority values to unified or separate pools of agents..

Referring now to FIGURE 2, a flow diagram depicts a process for scheduling inbound calls for response by an agent. The process begins at step 30 with the building of models from inbound call history. The inbound call history used to model the outcomes of interest may be a sample drawn from historical inbound calls of the same nature as the outcomes to be modeled or may be specifically designed during a test phase. For instance, a television advertisement aired in a single or limited number of television markets representative of the total targeted audience may be used to generate inbound calls having a volume within the capacity constraints of the calling center. The outcome of the inbound calls from the sample advertisement may then be used to create a model specific to the nature of the product sold by the advertisement. The advertisement-specific model is then used for the time periods during which the advertisement is presented to wider audiences so that inbound calls having a greater probability of resulting in a purchase will have a higher priority for response by an agent.

At step 32, inbound calls are received by the receiving device. Generally, inbound calls arrive continuously at the receiving device at rates that vary over time. The receiving device answers the inbound calls in a conventional manner and, at step 34, determines call and/or caller information. Call and/or caller information is determined through analysis of ANI

or DNIS information that arrives with inbound calls and also through data gathering such as by interaction with a VRU.

At step 36, call and/or caller information is  
5 provided to the scheduling module for a determination of  
a priority value based on the forecasted outcome of the  
inbound call. At step 38, the scheduling module  
determines if additional information is needed for  
calculation of the outcome forecast. For instance,  
10 account information may be acquired by the receiving  
device and passed to the scheduling module, or the  
scheduling module can acquire all or part of the  
information. If additional information is needed, at  
step 40, caller information is used to obtain additional  
15 account or demographic information. At step 42, the  
caller model is applied to caller information, account  
information and/or demographic information to determine a  
priority value for the inbound call. At step 43, in one  
embodiment, the receiving device sorts queues according  
20 to the priority value, reducing or eliminating the need  
for a virtual hold by the release of calls from the  
scheduling module. For instance, a linked list for  
receiving devices that support lined list data structures  
may be used to aid in the scheduling of inbound calls.

25 At step 44, inbound calls are scheduled for response  
by an agent interfaced with the receiving device.  
Inbound calls having lower priority values are placed on  
virtual hold while inbound calls having higher priority  
values are returned to the receiving device and placed in  
30 a queue for response by an agent. The length of a

virtual hold for an inbound call depends upon the volume of inbound calls, the capacity of the receiving device, the talk time of the agents per call and the priority value of an inbound call relative to other pending

5 inbound calls. Based on these factors, an inbound call is placed in virtual hold time and is forwarded to the receiving device in priority value order when agent resources are available and/or when a maximize hold time parameter has been exceeded. Alternatively, in

10 embodiments in which the receiving device can sort or change the order of an inbound queue based on available data including the priority value, the inbound queues of the receiving device may be re-ordered on a real-time basis as additional inquiries are received.

15 At step 46, the outcome of inbound calls is stored in the inbound call history data base. The inbound history data base tracks factors such as call success or abandonment and ultimate call outcome. Call outcome may include directly quantifiable factors such as a purchase  
20 decision or less quantifiable factors such as customer satisfaction as reflected by account usage, cancellations and related information that is derivable from account databases and other sources.

One example of an application of the inbound  
25 scheduling system is a credit card service calling center. Customers tend to make inbound calls at similar times of the day which leads to longer hold times when inbound call volumes are high. Often, inbound callers  
hang up or simply just "silently" close their account  
30 when hold times are excessive for that caller. Other

customers are less sensitive to hold times and thus less likely to alter their purchasing habits or account status as a factor of hold times. The scheduling system enhances the overall benefit from inbound telephone calls by providing a higher priority to inbound calls that are forecasted to have a desired result, such as increased account usage. Further, the effectiveness may be tested with champion/challenger testing that compares results of subsets of inbound calls in which one segment is prioritized and the other segment is not prioritized or is prioritized with a different priority strategy.

Another example of the present invention is an application for an integrated response center that simultaneously accepts inquiries from different types of communication media, such as simultaneous inquiries from telephone calls, VOIP, e-mails and instant messages. In such an environment, agent response to inquiries may be via the same media as the inquiry or through cross-channel communication. For instance, an e-mail inquiry may result in an e-mail response or, alternatively, in a telephone call response. Further, the priority of the response may depend, in part, on the media of the inquiry. For instance, generally an e-mail inquiry will have a lower priority than a telephone inquiry since a customer generally will not expect as rapid of a response when the customer sends an e-mail inquiry. However, if the customer who sent the e-mail inquiry has a high probability of purchase, an immediate response by a telephone call might provide a better sales outcome for an agent's time, even if a telephone inquiry with a

customer having a low probability of purchase is left on hold while the agent places an outbound call.

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In a highly constrained resource environment, particularly low priority inquiries, such as inquiries with a low probability of purchase, may be scheduled for outbound attempts at a later time in order to preserve response resources for higher priority inquiries. For instance, a low priority inbound telephone caller may be given a voice message that informs the caller of an excess wait time and that he will be contacted at a future time. The future time is determined by the caller's priority compared with the actual and projected priority of other inbound inquiries and the capacity of the agents to respond to the inquiries. Thus, if the capacity of the available agents is projected to exceed inbound inquiry demand and higher priority inquiry backlog in two hours, the low priority inbound caller may be given a message to expect a call in two hours. Similarly, an automated e-mail message may be provided to an e-mail inquiry informing the e-mail inquirer that he may expect a response at a specific time. In this way, inquiries are scheduled for outbound contact attempts on a prioritized basis rather than on a first-in-first-out basis. In one alternative embodiment, the inquirer may be prompted for the best time and communication channel, and an outbound contact attempt will be attempted at that time.

Although the present invention has been described in detail, it should be understood that various changes, substitutions and alterations can be made hereto without

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PATENT APPLICATION

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departing from the spirit and scope of the invention as  
defined by the appended claims.

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